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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000054

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES: TUNISIAN OPPOSITION PARTY
BENEFITS FROM CLOSE TIES TO PRESIDENT

REF: A. TUNIS 39
[1](#)B. 07 TUNIS 1470
[1](#)C. 07 TUNIS 1531

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Secretary General of the opposition Popular Unity Party (PUP) Mohamed Bouchicha acknowledged to the Ambassador Jan. 15 the need to improve freedom of expression and association, but said progress should be made "without interference" by foreigners. Bouchicha added that solutions would be found through dialogue, but dismissed calls by other civil society leaders for reform of the electoral process. The Ambassador discussed American foreign policy in the Middle East and highlighted the need for consistent democratic reform. The PUP Secretary General outlined the party's main concerns, but did not offer many specifics. A long-time political activist related to President Ben Ali's wife, Bouchicha was confident enough to gently critique the ruling party, but also hewed close to the GOT party line. End Summary.

Progress, Step by Step

[1](#)2. (C) Mohamed Bouchicha, Secretary General of the opposition Popular Unity Party (PUP), used his January 15 meeting with the Ambassador to highlight the progress the PUP has made since its founding in the 1970s. The PUP has 11 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, up from seven in 1999. With 3.78 percent of the vote, Bouchicha came in second to President Ben Ali during the 2004 presidential elections. Bouchicha enjoys good access to the president (President Ben Ali's wife is Bouchicha's first cousin), and he frequently mentioned conversations he had held with President Ben Ali regarding proposed political reforms. According to Bouchicha, the PUP's expansion plans are going well and the party now has offices in every governorate and all major cities. Though other opposition parties have described problems with local authorities, Bouchicha dismissed this concern saying that the PUP had never experienced problems with regional officials nor has it had problems with access to the media.

[1](#)3. (C) Bouchicha referred to the PUP's political platform in general terms, frequently in conjunction with the dangers of Islamists. Islamists pose a danger to the entire region, Bouchicha warned, and they exploit domestic conditions such as poverty and unemployment. He called on Europe and the United States to support development programs in an effort to

eliminate poverty and unemployment as fuel for Islamist propaganda. To this end, Bouchicha said the PUP urges the GOT to focus on economic issues such as agricultural and industrial development. Democracy, human rights, and gender equality, he continued, are also pillars of the PUP's platform and serve to guard against extremism.

Behind the Scenes

¶4. (C) Bouchicha spoke candidly about the GOT decision making process in the context of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) crisis. (Note: The LTDH has been in a standoff with government officials over its ability to convene meetings and hold its party Congress (Ref D). End Note.) When the Ambassador noted that it was important that Tunisia have an independent human rights organization, Bouchicha opined that if the GOT wanted a loyal human rights league, it could have easily established its own organization staffed by party-loyalists. However, because of the GOT's respect for the LTDH (the Arab world's oldest human rights league) the GOT wants to resolve this dispute through dialogue. The ongoing dispute, Bouchicha said, endures because LTDH President Mokhtar Trifi refuses to put the issue before the LTDH's general membership. (Note: According to Trifi, the problem is the other way around, and it is the GOT that is preventing him from meeting with party members to obtain their endorsement. See Ref A. End Note.)

¶5. (C) When the Ambassador posited the need for increased freedom of expression, Bouchicha maintained that Tunisia has freedom of the press, evidenced by the existence of independent media. He noted that President Ben Ali announced

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on November 7th (Ref B) that government funding for political party newspapers (for those represented in parliament) would be increased, and said his own party's newspaper had never been restricted regarding its content. As for television, Bouchicha alluded to a conversation he had with President Ben Ali about increased access, presumably for opposition parties, but did not provide details.

¶6. (C) Bouchicha said that Tunisia's laws on freedom of association are quite good, but acknowledged that their application is sometimes flawed. Still, he said, progress can be seen in acts such as the first congress of the new National Union for Tunisian Journalists or SNJT. Despite speculating that the GOT could have replaced the independent-minded LTDH with its own organization, Bouchicha did not acknowledge that the same reasoning has been attached to the GOT's support of the SNJT, which now co-exists with the independent and unrecognized Tunisian Journalists Syndicate (Ref C). Bouchicha said the SNJT is the first of its kind in Tunisia, and that many other associations operate independently. Some problems remain, he said, hinting that he had discussed the need to encourage freedom of association with the President.

Foreign Policy

¶7. (C) Although Bouchicha repeatedly extolled the virtues of dialogue to resolve conflict, he summarily dismissed calls from other civil society leaders (including Trifi) for international election monitors, at various times insinuating that those who do are extremists with ties to Islamists. Bouchicha implied that international election monitors would be akin to "foreign intervention" and that such "outside interference" would hamper the GOT's plans for democratic reform. Such issues "evolve slowly" and the President and the Ministry of the Interior are approaching them "tactfully." The Ambassador responded that a step by step approach is acceptable as long as progress is in fact being

made. As for a dialogue with other embassies, Bouchicha said that while he welcomed the opportunity to meet with the Ambassador to discuss PUP policies, his constituency strongly objected to US foreign policy in the Middle East, which prevented closer ties. The Ambassador explained that the United States is in Iraq at the request of the Iraqi government, and its presence has resulted in lower levels of violence. As for the Palestinian Territories, the Ambassador noted that the Annapolis Conference initiated progress towards an agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Territories. The Ambassador said that although the United States does not support Hamas, because of its endorsement of violence and rejection of Israel, it does support democratic processes.

Comment

18. (C) Bouchicha was clearly secure in his position. He was comfortable gently critiquing GOT policies, but mostly hewed to the party line defending the need for progress at the GOT's own pace. While frequently mentioning the need for dialogue, Bouchicha was at his most animated when critiquing the Embassy for meeting with independent civil society leaders, including the leaders of other authorized opposition parties, and he failed to differentiate how such meetings were different than the Ambassador's meeting with the PUP. Given the dichotomy, the PUP seems more interested in defending the GOT than pursuing a meaningful exchange with the USG or other civil society figures. However, we will continue to engage the PUP on US foreign policy issues, as well as domestic Tunisian concerns such as freedom of expression and freedom of association. End Comment.
GODEC